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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 001476

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SUBJECT: HONDURAN NATIONAL PROTEST FIZZLES WITHOUT
RESOLVING ANY ISSUES

REF: A. 07 TEGUCIGALPA 1367

- [1](#)B. 07 TEGUCIGALPA 1112
- [1](#)C. 06 TEGUCIGALPA 1471
- [1](#)D. 07 TEGUCIGALPA 0906
- [1](#)E. 07 TEGUCIGALPA 1236
- [1](#)F. 07 TEGUCIGALPA 1387

Classified By: Deputy Pol Chief Frank Penirian. Reasons 1.4(b/d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, frustrated in his struggle with the Honduran National Congress on issues such as telecommunications reform (ref. A), resorted to tacit support for a nation-wide protest on August 27, 2007 by the Bloque Popular and organized labor unions. Teachers, taxi drivers, transport workers and other groups blocked roads throughout the country in defense of agriculture, the environment, water, indigenous rights, free education, state-run enterprises, security and the poor. The diverse groups advocating for so many different issues in so many locations diffused and diminished the protest's impact. In fact, fewer than ten thousand workers showed up for the protest, and many rallied against the President and his Administration. One teacher was shot to death by an angry motorist. After the killing, President Zelaya named Foreign Minister Milton Jimenez to negotiate with the protestors, but they refused to meet with the Minister. Like the President's media blitz last May (ref. B), the protest was another way for the Administration to confront the "centers of power" such as the National Congress and media, but it did not rise to previous levels as in the teacher's strike last year (ref. C) and no issues were resolved. According to some analysts, this was really part of the struggle between President Mel Zelaya and former President Carlos Flores, who controls much of the inner workings of Congress, for the heart and soul of the Liberal Party (ref. D). END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) On August 27, 2007, the left-leaning Bloque Popular held a national protest with the support of organized labor groups such as teachers, taxi drivers, and transport workers. Fewer than ten thousand workers paralyzed the country for almost ten hours by blocking the normal flow of commerce and transportation in San Pedro Sula, El Progreso, La Ceiba, Danli, Siguatepeque, Comayagua, Ocotepeque, Choluteca, Copan and Santa Barbara. In Tegucigalpa, protestors closed off the exit to the north of the country from 5am to 2pm but did not disrupt traffic in the city. The workers protested the Mining, Water, and Agricultural Modernization Laws because they want to protect the environment, public access to water, and jobs in the agricultural sector. They advocated combating corruption, including within the police, free

education with no entrance exams, a freeze on prices of basic commodities, the strengthening of state-owned enterprises of SANAA (water and sanitation), ENEE (electricity), and Hondutel (telecommunications), and nationalization of fuel imports. Classes were suspended, including private schools, which affected 2.6 million students. Juan Barahona, a leader in the leftist Unitarian Workers Confederation of Honduras (CUTH), said that the protest was necessary because dialogue with the government is not possible.

¶3. (U) In Santa Barbara, a striking teacher was shot to death by an angry motorist who could not get through one of the barricades. Following the shooting, President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya designated Foreign Minister Milton Jimenez as the government representative to mediate the conflict. He was to be accompanied by Labor Minister Rixi Moncada, Natural Resources and Environment (SERNA) Minister Mayra Mejia, Manager of the National Telephone Corporation (CONATEL) Rasel Tome, and Public Ministry Prosecutor Omar Cerna, but the Bloque Popular and its supporters rejected the invitation and demanded to meet with the President himself. The protestors also called for the resignation of Presidential Advisor and spokesperson during the conflict, Raul Valladares, whom they blamed for the "hate campaign" that some of them believe led to the death of the teacher. Meanwhile, most of the other teachers disbanded, many to attend the funeral of their colleague. They reportedly want to re-start the protest in the next few days. The protest ended quickly in comparison to last year's teacher's strike (ref. C) with no issues resolved. Private sector and political leaders are calling on Zelaya to listen to the demands of the unions and resolve the problems of the protest. To Post's knowledge, no American citizens were involved or harmed during the protest.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The Secretary General of the Confederation of Honduran Workers (CTH), Altagracia Fuentes, was noticeably

absent from the demonstrations. She told Poloff that she did not want to be "used" by the Administration and speculated that Daniel Duron, the Secretary General of the General Workers Union (CGT), did not attend for the same reason, even though he recently has been strengthening ties with CLAT (Latin American Labor Confederation) in Venezuela and President Hugo Chavez (ref. E). Another leader of the CTH publicly warned that the protests were supported by the executive branch. Sources have indicated that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has contributed approximately USD 1 million to political interests in Honduras, some of which could have been channeled to this protest. But like Zelaya's media blitz earlier this year (ref. B), the Administration again miscalculated public reaction in an attempt to gain popular support for a weakened Presidency. It appears that the protest merely was a reflection of the conflict between the executive branch and the National Congress on such issues as the telecommunications bill and more broadly between the President and Carlos Flores, who is using the President of Congress, Roberto Michelleti, as his proxy in the struggle for the Liberal Party's next Presidential candidate (ref. D).

Earlier this month a smaller telecommunications bill passed, but President Zelaya promised to veto the bill and Michelleti promised to override the veto (ref. A), so it appears that part of Zelaya's motivation to support the protest was to take this issue to the streets.

¶5. (C) COMMENT (CONTINUED): In yesterday's El Heraldo, a conservative daily in Tegucigalpa, political analyst Juan Ramon Martinez explained that the executive branch wants Hondurans to believe that they can live without the National Congress, thereby putting into jeopardy democratic institutions. According to Martinez, the Administration was inciting unrest on the one hand and trying to act like an honest broker on the other, in effect using the streets to try to dissolve the National Congress as Hugo Chavez did in Venezuela. He also expressed concern about the involvement in the protest of the minor left-wing party Unificacion Democratica, which he believes could take advantage of a political vacuum to insert a Chavez-like figure. These worries were echoed by Former Labor Minister German Leitzelar

in a conversation with Poloff following the protest. The country seems to be going in a negative direction as Sweden decided to cut its assistance program amounting to USD 11.4 million the day after the protest. Although the outcome of the national protest was far from these scenarios, Zelaya recently commented to the Ambassador that the structure of institutions in Honduras does not work (ref. F), a line from one of his closest advisors, leftist Patty Rodas. It appears that Zelaya has thrown up his hands and given up on the hard work of reform, which continues to impede him from taking urgently needed action on long-standing problems and leaves open a political space for radical alternatives. END COMMENT.
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